

Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
Ranking Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs
"From Competition to Collaboration: Strengthening
the U.S.-Russia Relationship"
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Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this important hearing.

Earlier this month, Vice President Biden indicated that the new administration wants to press the reset button on the U.S.-Russia relationship.

Many, including myself, would be eager to move towards a more cooperative relationship.

Unfortunately, over the past ten years, we have seen the Russian government, led by Vladimir Putin, steadily become more authoritarian at home and more aggressive and destabilizing in its policies abroad.

Since assuming the Presidency of Russia in 2000 and continuing in his current post as Prime Minister, Mr. Putin has consolidated his power, restricted the activities of political opposition parties, and used various means to stifle independent media and NGOs.

It has also become increasingly apparent that corruption within the Russian government is widespread and reaches to the highest levels.

Many of those who have sought to criticize or expose that corruption have, in fact, been threatened and, on occasion, beaten or murdered.

The Russian government under Mr. Putin has also expanded its control over large-scale businesses, particularly in the energy sector. It has used its de facto control over nominally private-sector energy companies to shut off energy supplies to several neighboring states at times of political disagreements with those states.

In its foreign policy, the Russian government's actions not only constitute a threat to critical U.S. security interests but are destructive to Russia's own long-term interests.

Perhaps in an effort to create a growing challenge for the United States in the Persian Gulf region, the Putin government has provided nuclear technology and advanced weapons to Iran.

In the long run, however, the fundamentalist Islamic leaders in Tehran will have no great affinity for Moscow, and, once they have the nuclear arsenal they seek, will almost certainly increase their involvement in radicalizing the Muslim nations on Russia's borders and Russia's growing Muslim population.

It is also not in Russia's interest to see Islamic extremism spread north into Russia from Afghanistan.

Yet, while Russian officials express a willingness to support our efforts in Afghanistan, Russia is clearly working to persuade the Central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan to close a US air base on its territory that is vital to supporting our mission in Afghanistan.

The Russian invasion of Georgia last year, which followed years of increasingly provocative actions by the Putin government in the separatist regions of that country, has led many in the United States and Europe who have supported closer cooperation with Russia, to question its intentions.

In fact, the recognition of the separatist regions in Georgia by the Putin government may well re-open painful questions regarding Russian sovereignty over parts of its own territory that may seek independence.

While the US and the European Union have maintained arms embargoes on China since the Tiananmen massacre in Beijing twenty years ago, Russia has sold significant quantities of advanced weapons to that country.

At a time when Russia's population is declining and its economy is under-developed, it seems ironic that the Russian government, on its own, would help arm a neighbor such as China, whose population and economy are set to far out-strip it.

I hope that our witnesses today will speak to the factors driving Russian foreign policy as dictated and managed by Mr. Putin.

I think that is vital to know how that policy is influenced by:

- A general resentment of the United States;
- A desire to create challenges to US influence in key regions, such as the Persian Gulf and the straits off Taiwan;

It is also very important for us to know how far Mr. Putin and his top officials might go if they thought that a more aggressive foreign policy – perhaps another invasion of Georgia – might help preserve their popularity among average Russians, as the Russian economy follows downward declining prices for its oil exports.

Yesterday, I introduced a resolution calling on President Obama to work with the other six original member-states of what is now known as the G-8 group of states, to terminate the Russian government's participation in that group, until the President determines that the Russian leadership has:

- Taken substantive steps in removing restrictions on the political opposition, independent media and human rights groups in Russia;
- Implemented free market reforms and tackled corruption on all levels;
- Ceased to use energy as a political tool against its neighbors;
- Fulfilled its commitments to withdraw its military from the separatist region of Moldova and from the separatist regions of Georgia; and
- Ceased all actions that threaten the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia's neighbors.

Since the Soviet Union broke apart in 1991, the United States and the European Union have pursued policies meant to integrate a stable and reformed Russia as a partner at least, if not a full member, of their trans-Atlantic community of nations.

We cannot continue to support such integration, however, if it serves to spread corruption and destabilization in the regions neighboring Russia and lying on its periphery.

Until that principle is accepted by the Russian leadership, I doubt that a so-called reset of our relationship with Russia would serve our long-term interests and values.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing.

I also thank our distinguished witnesses for appearing before the Committee today and look forward to their testimony.